

1.

I'd been at a party on the Caelian the night before. My tongue tasted like a gladiator's jockstrap, my head was pounding like Vulcan's smithy, and if you'd held up a hand and asked me how many fingers you'd got I'd've been hard put to give a definite answer without using an abacus. My usual morning condition, in other words, and hardly the best state for a first meeting with a tough cookie like the Lady Rufia Perilla.

You know the type: six feet tall, four across the shoulders, hair like wire and biceps like rocks. A cross between Penthesilea the Amazon Queen and Medusa the Gorgon before Perseus shortened her by a head, with a look and a voice that can wither a man's balls at thirty yards.

Only the woman striding towards me across the marble hall floor trailing my slave Bathyllus behind her like an arena cat's leavings wasn't like that at all. Far from it. This particular tough cookie was a stunner.

I did a quick appraisal. Early twenties (a year or so older than me), spear-straight and slim, clear-skinned, tall and tawny, with hair so bright that it hurt. On the debit side, eyes that would've nailed a basilisk and a no-nonsense perfume (I could smell it already) that reminded me unpleasantly of cold plunges, clean living and healthy exercise. Debit item three...

Item three was Bathyllus. The little guy looked chewed, and no one fazes Bathyllus. He stares down pukkah senators and deglazes dowagers, he can reduce legionary commanders to jelly, and I'd back him against anything human and maybe a step or two either side. So if this lady had taken Bathyllus apart already then she scared the shit out of me.

I tried to stand and then thought better of it. The floor wasn't too steady that morning.

'You're Marcus Valerius Messalla Corvinus.' Rufia Perilla obviously didn't believe in wasting time, or in asking questions.

'Uh...yeah.' It was less of a confirmation than a nervous twitch. I'd've said the same if she'd called me Tiberius Julius Caesar.

'Your grandfather' - she fixed me with a glare that had me checking whether I'd remembered to put a tunic on - 'was my stepfather's foremost patron.'

'No kidding. Your stepfather?'

'The poet.'

'The poet?' Shit. My mind wasn't up to snappy intellectual banter this time of the morning. The only poet I could think of offhand was Homer, and I was fairly sure even in my present condition that he wasn't the guy she meant.

'The poet Ovid.'

'Oh, *that* poet!' A bell in my head was ringing faintly. Or maybe it was just my hangover. 'Yeah. Great. So you're...what's-his-name's stepdaughter? Well well well well well!'

I knew the slip was a bad one when I saw her mouth harden into a line you could've used to cut marble. Under normal circumstances, or at least when I was completely sober, which isn't quite the same thing, I'd never have made a mistake like that. I may have no interest in literature but I'm no thicko. Maybe Ovid had been rotting away in exile for ten years, but he was still the best poet we'd had since Horace hung his clogs up.

The words were out and there was no calling them back. Things went very quiet, the temperature dropped to its midwinter level and I swear I saw ice form in the ornamental pool. Bathyllus had been watching our little exchange like Cassandra waiting for Agamemnon to speak his last line and head for the tub. Now he winced and looked away. Bathyllus never could stand the sight of blood.

The beautiful arched eyebrows came down like a chopper.

'I realise this is hard for you to follow in your present condition, Valerius Corvinus,' she said in a voice that was pure Egyptian natron, 'but do try please because it's important. My stepfather was Publius Ovidius Naso. He wrote poetry and was exiled to Tomi on the Black Sea. You understand the word "poetry" or should I explain?'

'Uh...yeah. I mean no.' Jupiter! I wasn't up to this. Not this morning. Probably not ever. 'Look, I'm sorry. Sit down, er...'

'Perilla. Rufia Perilla. What on?'

'Hmm? Oh, yeah. Bathyllus!'

But Bathyllus was already carrying one of my best chairs through from the study. I hadn't seen the little bastard move that fast in years. Not since his hernia.

She sat, and I tried, desperately, to put my head back together again.

'You said "wrote", Lady Rufia?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'"Wrote". Past tense. He's, like, dead, then. Ovid. Your stepfather.'

'Yeah, I know. As a conversational gambit it stank. But you must remember I was having a hard time stopping my brain from oozing out my ears. Delicacy was the least of my problems.'

She nodded and lowered her eyes. For a moment I saw the ice melt and the woman show through.

'The news came two days ago,' she said. 'He died last winter just after the sea lanes closed. The message came by the first ship.'

'Uh, I'm sorry.'

'Don't be.' The ice was back. 'He was glad to go. He hated Tomi, and that...' her teeth closed on the word. 'The emperor would never have let him come home.'

True enough, I thought. Tiberius hadn't actually been the one to exile the guy, but he'd confirmed Augustus's sentence after the old emperor fell off his perch. Became a god. Whatever. I didn't know what the reason had been for packing Ovid off to Tomi originally, nor, to my knowledge, did anyone else; but I could make an educated guess. Perilla's stepfather had had the morals and self-restraint of a priapic rabbit. One day the poor bastard had found himself hauled into Augustus's private study. There the emperor had chewed off his balls and stuffed a one-way ticket to the Black Sea up his rectum. Exit Rome's greatest living poet, with no formal charge and no trial. When Augustus died (or was promoted, if you prefer) Ovid's friends had put in to the new emperor for a pardon. The Wart had refused. Now, it seemed, the guy had moved on to the Complete Works category and a pardon was academic.

Bathyllus soft-shoed across the marble floor, showing the whites of his eyes. He set a small table beside Perilla with a bowl of fruit and some nuts on it, bowed and sidled out again quickly. Maybe it was some weird Greek ceremony of propitiation: Bathyllus can be a superstitious sod at times. In any event it was wasted. Perilla ignored both the table and him, confining herself to straightening her exquisitely draped mantle. I gathered the shreds of my dignity together, tried to ignore whoever was sawing off the top of my skull, and got to the point.

'So how can I help?'

'I should have thought that was obvious.'

The hell with dignity. 'Look, lady, I don't read minds, right? Just give it to me straight.'

Yeah. Not exactly formal Ciceronian prose but I was getting just a little tetchy myself. Strangely, Perilla didn't seem to mind. For a moment her eyes rested on me; coolly, appraisingly.

'I'm sorry, Valerius Corvinus,' she said. 'You're perfectly correct, and I apologise. As I said, my stepfather has just died. We - my mother and I - would like his ashes to be returned to Rome for burial. As his patron it is of course your duty to put our request to the emperor.'

Yeah. Her exact words, I swear to you. I gaped. If he wants you to do something your ordinary client will spend a day or so telling you what a great guy you are, sending you the odd sturgeon, maybe a box or two of stuffed Alexandrian figs. Then when he's softened you up enough he might get round to broaching the subject in the most roundabout way he can think of. Rufia Perilla had just committed a social gaffe equivalent to asking Tiberius what he put on his boils. More, she'd done it without turning a strand of her exquisitely coiffeured hair.

'I realise that you are not precisely the correct member of your family to approach,' she went on. 'Your uncle Marcus Valerius Cotta Maximus Messalinus' (Jupiter! Did Uncle Cotta have all these names?) 'would as one of my stepfather's closest friends have been a more

natural choice. Your father, too, would have been more...' She hesitated. I could see her taking in my unshaven jowls, the bags under my eyes, the slouch. 'More suitable.'

Jupiter's balls! 'Now look, lady...' I said. As a protest it was feeble, and she ignored it.

'However, I have here a letter which I think will explain everything.'

She reached under her mantle, giving me a brief glimpse of red undertunic, brought out a small scroll of paper and handed it over. I was still in shock. Without even checking that the thing was addressed to me I broke the seal and waited until the writing had stopped dancing around on the page.

The letter was from my Uncle Cotta, and in his usual mind-numbing, rambling style.

Marcus Valerius Cotta Maximus Messalinus to his nephew Marcus. Greetings.

This is to introduce Rufia Perilla, the stepdaughter of my old friend Publius Ovidius Naso lately dead at Tomi. She'll scare the hell out of you, Marcus, but her heart's in the right place as well as everything else so help her as best you can, eh, boy? I've suggested you rather than your father because that pompous arselicker wouldn't be seen dead helping anyone unless he got something out of it for himself. Besides, poor Publius never could stand him and it was mutual so his stepdaughter wouldn't get much change out of the old hypocrite either. As you may or may not know I'm out too being off to Athens shortly for a few months of well-earned carnality, so you're hereby elected. Don't let the family down, eh, boy?

Farewell.

There was a PS:

She's married to an unpleasant bugger called Suillius Rufus. He's out east at present and from all accounts they can't stand each other. A nod's as good as a wink, eh? Cotta.

I raised my eyes from the letter to find that hers were fixed on me. Perhaps I'd caught her at an unguarded moment, perhaps the look was intentional. I don't know. But for the first time she looked vulnerable. Desperate and vulnerable. Now I may be a self-indulgent overbred slob, but at least I'm a kind-hearted self-indulgent overbred slob, and that look showed me two things. First that whatever front she put on it had cost Rufia Perilla a lot to ask for help, mine or whoever's. And second (call me a sucker if you like) I knew I'd do almost anything to see her smile.

Maybe Uncle Cotta's postscript was relevant too.

'Okay,' I said. 'Consider it done.'

Which, in retrospect, was a pretty stupid thing to say. If any nasty-minded gods were listening I was just asking for the clouting of the century. Which was more or less what I was in for. Not that I'd've taken the words back even if I'd known, because as I spoke them for another precious instant the ice melted and the other Perilla showed through.

That paid for everything.